

Advent v. Capitalism

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 30, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I mentioned the danger of allowing consumerism to swamp the true spirituality of the season and the need to actively resist that consumerism. Today, I want to expand on that a little.

The problem with consumerism as it relates to Christmas is not just that it feeds the beast of modern capitalism, although that is reason enough. In his magisterial history of Evangelicalism, George Marsden writes of our Protestant brethren in the 1920s, "Relatively few mainstream Protestants questioned in any basic way the commercial character of the culture and the material and competitive values it was promoting." Indeed, in 1925, one of the best-selling books was Bruce Barton's "The Man Nobody Knows" which portrayed the Lord as a businessman, a successful one of course. In the U.S. sadly, we RCs have been too quick to follow the lead of our Protestant brethren, reluctant to challenge the "material and competitive values" of the culture, attributing the characteristics we associate with a mom-and-pop shop "hard work, community involvement, familial bonds" to the impersonal market capitalism that actually dominates the economy and the culture. But, as I say, the problem is deeper still and it is deadly for Advent.

Here is what the Holy Father said about Advent and cultivating the experience of expectancy last Sunday at the Angelus:

Waiting -- standing by -- is a dimension that crosses all of our existence: personal, family and social. This waiting is found in a thousand situations, from those little, everyday ones all the way to the most important things, those which completely, deeply, wrap us up. Among these, let us think of the waiting for a child by a couple; those of a relative or friend who comes to visit us from afar; let us think, for a young person, of the waiting for the result of an important test, or a job interview; in emotional relationships, of the waiting for one's encounter with their beloved, of the response to a letter, or the acceptance of an apology... It could be said that man is alive while he waits, that in his heart hope is alive. And from these waitings man comes to know himself: our moral and spiritual "stature" can be measured by that for which we wait, by that in which we hope.

Each of us, then, especially in this time that prepares us for Christmas, can ask ourselves: what am I waiting for? What, in this moment of my life, reaches out of my heart?

It is not difficult to see how consumerism provides us with a twisted sense of Christmas. We raise our kids to expect that new bike, or the new flat screen TV, not to expect a Savior. Consumerism does not invite the sense of penance that is essential to cultivating an expectancy regarding a Savior "you would think it would be obvious to us by now, the fact that we are incapable of saving ourselves from our own sins, that we truly need a Savior who can bring forgiveness and mercy to our souls. Our consumer culture produces many things, but spiritual mirrors for the soul are not among them.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is not the twisted sense of expectancy we impart to our children, but the way consumerism distorts the gift-giver as well. Those who expect and receive a Savior must acknowledge their dependence upon God, their complete inability to affect what God is about to affect, the pure grace of the Incarnation, the fact that the initiative is entirely in God's hands. It is not only that we must wait, it is that

waiting is the only thing we can do in this divine drama of salvation. God is the actor. It is He who enters human history. But, consumerism makes us all demi-gods. It puts us in charge of our own history. ?The customer is always right.? We cultivate a sense of materialistic expectancy in our children and then we fulfill that expectancy ourselves, we are the ones they hope for. We know they will feel grateful to us ? and not just the kids, but the wife for those pearls, the neighbor for that snow shovel, the co-worker for that gift card ? they will see us as the one they were waiting for. I was wrong a moment ago: This consumerist expectancy does not make us demi-gods but false idols.

So, my anti-consumerist hostility is not just some leftie suspicion of capitalism. My hostility is rooted in a sense of the spiritual life and the unique quality of Advent as a time of expectancy, an attitude that is simply incompatible with the spread-eagle consumerism of contemporary Christmas in America. Resist the culture this season. We don?t need a culture war, not on this issue and not on any issue. But, we need to stand apart from the culture at times. We need to encourage our families and our friends to do so as well. Don?t get swept up by the craziness. Step away and pose to yourself the question the Pope asks: What are we waiting for?

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